

Congress seen coasting since August recess

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The lack of significant legislative activity in the House following the August recess has created a partisan blame game among lawmakers.

House Republicans say Senate Democrats have created a legislative bottleneck, while both House and Senate Democrats say they're waiting for the Republicans to address some tough issues.

Meanwhile, the Senate has failed to pass a budget resolution and the House has passed only five of the 13 appropriations bills needed to keep the government running after Sept. 30.

For now, the House lawmakers seem content to pass nonbinding resolutions stating what it is they really want to do, like pass welfare reform or make the estate tax repeal permanent. The House will vote on both resolutions this week. Nevertheless, the House Republican leadership maintains that it has fulfilled its legislative responsibilities.

"We have not run out of gas," said House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Texas). "We've done our work. There's a legislative bottleneck. We're just waiting for the Senate to finish their chores."

In fact, among Republicans, phrases like "do-nothing Daschlecrats" are being tossed around as possible election year slogans.

And House GOP aides point out that several bills, including anti-terrorism insurance, the energy bill and election reform legislation, are languishing in conference committees.

"I'm starting to worry about where we are in this Congress," House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) told reporters last Thursday, after the House had adjourned for the week. "There are a lot of important issues we are not acting on and we don't seem to be on a real breakneck schedule here."

Immediately after the Sept. 11 terror attacks, the House passed a flurry of significant legislation, such as the USA Patriot Act, and anti-terrorism insurance and homeland security bills. This spring, at the height of the widespread corporate malfeasance on Wall Street, the Congress passed the Sarbanes-Oxley bill, which increased penalties for corporate fraud and made chief executives more accountable to company shareholders.

This summer, Congress also passed legislation granting President Bush the authority to negotiate trade agreements. Presidential authority to do so had expired in 1994.

"This has been the most productive Congress in history," Armey said last week.

Not only has the House been productive, but it has been efficient, too. In the Second session of the 107th Congress, the House has met for only 93 days thus far, according to records kept by the House Legislative Resource Center. In equivalent second sessions in election years, such as 1998, the House was in session 119 days. In 2000, lawmakers met for 139 days. Both the 1998 and 2000 sessions ended with lame-duck sessions.

Still, the toughest work of the session, finishing the appropriations bills, is usually reserved for its final days. That process has ground to a halt over the Labor-Health and Human Services-Education bill, which House leaders decided to tackle first before taking on the remaining seven bills. The Labor appropriations bill is normally the most contested of the group of 13 because of its implications for social policy.

If Congress does not finish the appropriations process, it will be forced to pass at least one continuing resolution to buy time to finish the budget.

But for months, House Democrats have argued that the GOP wasted the time on the legislative calendar.

Another hurdle to expediting domestic legislation is the looming debate on authorizing President Bush to launch an invasion of Iraq. Although Democrats say this is a very important issue, they still want time to focus on "kitchen table" concerns.

"We have a wide domestic agenda that we feel deserves attention," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), a chief deputy whip.

Earlier this year the House passed a GOP version of prescription drug benefits that left Democrats disappointed. And the Senate has not been able to reach a compromise to pass its own plan.

"I'm not satisfied leaving here [for the election recess] without trying to get on prescription drugs," Gephardt said. "People think we can do this."

Democrats also want to speak more on corporate responsibility and pension reform.

"We certainly have enough hours in the day where we could be active on these issues," Schakowsky contended last Thursday.

It's likely the Democrats will use one-minute speeches, special orders and perhaps even a discharge petition to voice their agenda.